The impact of the Second World War on The Soviet Union under Stalin

Background

On 22 June 1941 over three million German soldiers, and several thousand vehicles and aircraft, attacked the Soviet Union in Operation Barbarossa. However, relations between the two countries had been peaceful during the previous eighteen months, which helps to explain why the invasion was devastating and surprising for Russia. Since the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939, Hitler and Stalin had been allies, and in the following autumn their armies invaded Poland and partitioned it. Germany had an important trading relationship with Stalin’s Russia, receiving from February 1940 600,000 tons of grains and 900,000 tons of oil. These supplies helped Hitler in his lightning wars of conquest of Western Europe.

By the winter of 1940, Hitler controlled all of Western Europe, and had abandoned ideas of invading Britain by sea – a risky venture for which Germany lacked suitable ships. During 1940 Hitler observed as Stalin’s army (weakened by his purge of his thousands of his own officers in 1937-1938), failed miserably in its war with Finland. In spite of all the public fanfare surrounding his non-aggression pact with Stalin, Hitler never abandoned his designs for the annihilation of the Soviet Union, the destruction of its cities, and the “reduction” of its urban population by about 30 million through starvation. Hitler saw Russia as the incubator of Communism (which he blamed for the revolution inside Germany that caused it to seek an armistice at the World War I in 1918) and as the centre of Jewish world-power. Bizarrely, Hitler believed that the Jews also controlled US capitalism as well as Russian Communism, and that the two were conspiring to crush Germany. For Hitler, Russia would become a source of food and labour for the German people. In Hitler’s Russia there would be no place for the educated, the city-dwellers, the intellectuals or the Jews.

Early German successes

In spite of numerous warnings from Russian spies in both Germany and Britain, Stalin declined to believe that the millions of German soldiers massed on the dividing line between German-ruled and Russia-ruled Poland were planning to attack him. In the early hours of the morning on 22 June 1941 (a time of maximum daylight) the German Army attacked across the Bug River.

The initial effect of the attack was devastating on Stalin – as his much of his strategy had been based around the Pact. For a long-time historians believed that the Red Army had no war plans, and that it was caught napping. In fact, it did have war plans of its own, but Hitler struck first against a disorganised Russia. While Stalin’s army was hampered by very poor command and communications, one of the painful truths that Stalin later concealed was that tens of thousands of soldiers surrendered every day without firing a shot. In the first eighteen months of the German invasion (June 1941-Nov 1942) three million Russian soldiers, 65% of the army’s strength, were captured. Surrounded and lacking leadership, many did not know what to do. Furthermore, many thousands of soldiers were from regions that had been terrorized by Stalin, and had no intention of dying for him. In areas such as Estonia and the Ukraine (where the NKVD murdered and tortured suspected anti-Communists) some of the local populations welcomed the German Army as liberators (although they were soon to learn that Hitler’s rule would be as brutal, and often worse, than Stalin’s). However, other Russian soldiers fought bravely, and their lives were wasted by their commanders, who told them to charge German tanks and machine-guns in wave-
attacks. Defeat followed defeat throughout the summer of 1941. So many Russian soldiers were captured or surrendered that the Germans could not cope with them. Most were starved to death, as the Nazis deemed the Russians not to be worth feeding.

As well as the chaos and disorder in Russian ranks, and the welcoming attitude of many of the local populations, the Germans also benefited from the warm weather and dry ground across the summer of 1941. This permitted vehicles to move quickly – surrounding and outflanking the Russians – and also aircraft to support the soldiers by bombing Russian positions and destroying their air force.

By September 1941 key former Soviet controlled cities such as Minsk (left), Smolensk and Kiev, as well as the capitals of the Baltic States were all under German rule. 452,000 Russian soldiers were captured at Kiev. Russian-attempted counter-attacks were always catastrophic, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of Russian soldiers for no effect at all. Stalin’s response to these defeats was to have many of his frontline generals tried for treason and shot. (Those captured by the Germans, and who survived German captivity, were shot on Stalin’s orders when they were released after Germany’s defeat.)

By October 1941 the key cities of Leningrad and Moscow (the birthplaces of the Communist revolution) were under direct threat. Although Stalin evacuated most of the government and Communist Party from Moscow, he decided to stay, and hold the City.

On 7 November 1941 Stalin addressed the Red Army at a parade on Red Square:

‘Comrades, men of the Red Army and Red Navy, commanders and political instructors, men and women guerrillas, the whole world is looking to you as the force capable of destroying the plundering hordes of German invaders. The enslaved peoples of Europe who have fallen under the yoke of the German invaders look to you as their liberators. A great liberating mission has fallen to your lot. Be worthy of this mission! ... May the victorious banner of the great Lenin be your lodestar! For the complete destruction of the German invaders! Death to the German invaders! Long live our glorious Motherland, her liberty and her independence! Under the banner of Lenin, forward to victory!’
Reasons for the revival of the Soviet Union under Stalin

In the very short-term, the city of Moscow, and Stalin’s rule, were saved by the tenacity of the Red Army (bolstered by new soldiers from Siberia and Central Asia) and an appalling winter that was one of the coldest of the entire Twentieth Century. Hitler’s military planners had argued to him back in 1940 that the Germany Army could only win in Russia (1) if its supply-lines back home were no more than 500 kilometres (2) and that a full and decisive victory had been achieved before the winter. This was because the Germany Army lacked trained manpower, equipment, fuel and coal to continue attacking across the winter. In spite of Nazi proclamations of final victory in October 1941, winter temperatures of -50c brought the German Army to a halt outside Moscow. Meanwhile, Leningrad was encircled and endured a 900 day siege, in which tens of thousands of men, women and children starved to death – lying unburied in the frozen streets.

Lacking proper winter clothing and equipment, the German Army was driven back 80 kilometres from Moscow by a Russian counter-offensive in January 1942. More significantly still, the USA was now at war with Germany and Japan, and American military supplies (especially trucks, of which Russia had very few) began to be delivered in large numbers.

Although the German Army resumed its offensive South deep into the Ukraine, and across the River Don and towards the Volga, with the capture of the Baku oil-fields as the final target, in spring and summer of 1942, it was already in trouble.

German supply lines now extended almost 1000 kilometres back home. These were vulnerable to attacks from groups of partisans who lived deep in the forests of Russia and the Baltic States. These secret armies wiped out entire German supply convoys. In response, the Germans murdered hundreds of thousands of Russian civilians. Almost two million Jews in Soviet territory were killed in mass-shootings by Germans, and by local Anti-Semitic volunteers. Behind the German lines chaos reigned, as independent, pro-Soviet and pro-Nazi guerrilla and militia groups attacked each other, as well as totally innocent bystanders. Populations that had once welcomed the Nazis soon despaired as they realised that were being left to starve, or taken back to Germany as labour conscripts, as 2 million were. Millions of ordinary Russians died from hunger and cold under German occupation.

Stalin was also changing as a commander. During the disasters of 1941, Stalin had interfered with the decision-making of his generals. From 1942, he was more trusting of his generals, especially Georgi Zhukov, Ivan Konev and Vassily Chuikov. This mattered during the defence of the city of Stalingrad, which the Germans almost captured, but then found themselves surrounded by Russian Armies on all sides. During the war, entire Russian factories were moved East of the Ural mountains, beyond the range of German aircraft, while at all times posters, propaganda films and
radio broadcasts were produced urging all Soviet citizens to sacrifice themselves for the Great Patriotic War.

German soldiers in the ruins of Stalingrad. This type of fighting did not suit the Germans, as their tanks and aircraft were no use in ruined buildings and piles of rubble. When winter came, they were cut off, and could not be supplied by air.

Russian snipers equipped with special rifles at Stalingrad. Every German killed at Stalingrad was hard to replace, whereas the Russians were able to bring ever more men across the Volga on either side of the city, surrounding the Germans by the end of November 1942.

The defeat and capture of some of Germany’s 100,000 best-trained and equipped soldiers at Stalingrad in the winter of 1942-3 did not mean that the war was over in the East. But it did mean that for the remaining two and a half years of fighting, the Germans were almost always on the defensive.

The war in the East did not finally end until the capture of Berlin by the Russian Army at the very end of April 1945. The turnaround in fortunes has been remarkable. In December 1941 German soldiers could see the centre of Moscow; less than four years Berlin was in ruins and under Red Army control. In the meantime, 10 million Russian soldiers had been killed, and the same number of civilians; about 4.3 million German soldiers had been killed and 3 million captured, and all of Jewish civilisation under German rule had been wiped out.
Stalin’s popularity

During wartime Stalin’s image was carefully managed and projected as that of the great commander, leading The Motherland against a bestial enemy. Propaganda was essential for the regime to maintain morale and popular belief in victory. Assessing Stalin’s popularity is difficult, as control on expression was absolute, but his reputation likely to have benefited greatly from the tide of victories from 1943 onwards, and the international prestige – including praise from Roosevelt and Churchill, that this brought. Political Officers played a vital role in the Army – they had the power to countermand the orders of regular officers, and organised lectures on politics and the leadership of Stalin.

In Soviet propaganda, all Soviet victories were ultimately attributed to Stalin the master-strategist, even when he was reliant on the talents of commanders such as Chuikov, Zhukov and Konev.

Stalin’s May Day Speech, 1945, excerpt:

“The brilliant victories won by Soviet troops in the Great Patriotic War have demonstrated the heroic might of the Red Army and its high military skill. In the progress of the war our Motherland has acquired a first-rate regular army, capable of upholding the great socialist achievements of our people and of securing the State interests of the Soviet Union. Despite the fact that the Soviet Union for four years has been waging a war on an unparalleled scale demanding colossal expenditures, our socialist economic system is gaining strength and developing, while the economy of the liberated regions, plundered and ruined by the German invaders, is successfully and swiftly reviving.

This is the result of the heroic efforts of the workers and collective farmers, of the Soviet intellectuals, of the women and youth of our country, inspired and guided by the great Bolshevik Party. The World War unleashed by the German imperialists is drawing to a close. The collapse of Hitlerite Germany is a matter of the nearest future. The Hitlerite ringleaders who imagined themselves the rulers of the world have found themselves ruined. The mortally wounded fascist beast is breathing his last. One thing is now required – to deal the death blow to the fascist beast.”
The Post-War purges

The relief at the defeat of Hitler’s Germany in early May 1945 did not bring much respite to the Soviet peoples. Stalin and his Chief of Secret Police, Lavrenti Beria, were aware that across his empire several nationalities had initially reacted to German occupation as liberation from Soviet rule. Many groups such as the Cossacks, the Ukrainians, the Latvians and the Estonians had provided soldiers and helpers for the German Army and SS. A few thousand Russian prisoners in Germany had even volunteered to join the German Army under a captured Russian general called Vlasov.

As Russian soldiers returned from German captivity, Stalin feared that many were in fact traitors who had given up too easily. Even before the war had ended, Stalin was deporting nationalities whom he distrusted to Siberia. Up until the late 1940s a 40,000 strong guerrilla army called the Forest Brothers resisted Stalin’s re-occupation of Estonia. They were still active in the 1960s.

Dimitri Volkogonov, the Red Army’s official historian during the liberal Gorbachev years of the 1980s, and himself a war veteran, wrote of this period:

‘Despite having the unquestioning obedience of the people, Stalin did not rest. In January 1948 he called in his Minister of the Interior, Kruglov, and ordered him to devise ‘concrete measures’ for constructing new, additional concentration camps and prisons for special purposes. “We need special conditions for holding Trotskyites, Mensheviks, SRs, anarchists and Whites.” “It will be done, Comrade Stalin, it will be done.”” (Volkogonov, Stalin, Triumph and Tragedy, p.511.)

Stalin was also concerned about the loyalties of the Communist Party. Just as in 1934 the Leningrad branch of the Communist Party, under Kirov, had been suspected of opposition, so it fell under suspicion again in 1948. Stalin feared that the Leningrad Party, now led by Kuznetsov and Voznesensky had become too independent and self-sufficient during the 900 day siege by the Nazis in 1941-1944, and he felt that it must be brought back into line.

In 1954, after Stalin’s death, one of the leading Leningrad officials, who had been arrested but survived, reported to investigators:

‘I committed no crimes and did not regard myself as guilty, nor do I now. I gave my evidence after being systematically beaten because I denied my guilt. Investigator Putinstev began beating me at the interrogations ... he beat me about the head, in the face and the legs. Once he beat me so severely that blood came out of my ears. After these beatings he sent me to solitary confinement, threatened to kill my wife and children and give me twenty years of camp if I did not confess. As a result, I signed, whatever he wanted me to.’

As a result of these ‘confessions’ the leaders of the Leningrad Party, including Kuznetsov and Voznesensky, were shot as traitors.
Near the end of his life, in 1952, Stalin came to believe that the Jews of the USSR were plotting to murder him through his own doctors. The so-called Doctors’ Plot was one of the most mysterious and unusual of Stalin’s obsessions. In 1942 Stalin had approved the setting up of a Jewish Committee in Russia to publicise to the world, and especially the USA, the horrors of the Nazi mass murder of Jews in the parts of Russia they occupied. However, once the war had ended, Stalin feared their international connections. By 1952 many of Stalin’s own generation had already died or were dying. He became convinced that because so many doctors were Jewish, that there was a plot to murder the Soviet leadership through medical ‘errors.’

Between May and July 1952 fourteen Jewish academics and doctors were tried for their role in the ‘plot’, of which thirteen were shot.

Khrushchev later claimed that Stalin was considering deporting the Jews of Russia to slave labour camps.

This cartoon, published in the official ‘humorous’ magazine Krokodil in January 1953, shows a Jewish doctor being kicked out, with money spilling out of his pockets. A crude caricature, it was almost identical to the racist propaganda of Nazi Germany.

The persecution of the Jews was quickly abandoned when Stalin died on 5-6 March 1953.

Stalin’s funeral, March 1953.
Three bitter rivals:
KGB chief Lavrenti Beria; Nikolai Bulganin; and Nikita Khrushchev